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ABSTRACT

Intermediate level students of English as a second language reach a critical stage in their language learning after which motivation wanes if no specific attainable goals are offered as encouragement to progress. The ability to enjoy recreational reading can provide those goals, but students must make the transition from dependence on the teacher for reading support to independent reading. The rewards of independent recreational reading include entertainment, greater linguistic competence, increasing confidence in approaching written discourse, and heightened cultural awareness. What is needed is a course in independent reading of fiction. Course units should cover: developing awareness of approaches to the text, creating expectations about a work of fiction, predicting the organization of the text, dealing with unfamiliar lexical items, increasing reading speed, recognizing cohesive links, understanding language in context, understanding a story and responding to it, and selecting the appropriate book to read. (MSE)

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READING FOR PLEASURE WITH AN INTERMEDIATE LEVEL OF ENGLISH

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With the current emphasis on analyzing and, where possible, satisfying student needs, the narrow interpretation of this term which considers only professional or academic reasons for learning English as a foreign language may cause teachers to overlook the fact that many students would also (or instead) like to be able to pick up a work of English fiction and simply enjoy reading it. Libraries and bookshops, or the bookshelves of friends, can provide ample opportunity for non-native speakers in Mexico and elsewhere to read English novels and short stories independently, provided that they have the motivation and the confidence to tackle extensive reading in a foreign language, as well as the ability to use appropriate strategies flexibly enough for reading to be fluent and therefore pleasurable.

Adolescents who have reached the middle of the so-called "intermediate plateau" in their English language learning, but who lack any obvious and analyzable reason for achieving greater proficiency, may particularly benefit from a course designed to prepare them for autonomous, non-technical reading. These students have reached a critical stage in the learning process after which motivation will wane if no specific and attainable goals are offered as encouragement to further progress. The ability to read stories about detectives, ghosts, murder, romance or science fiction can provide such goals.

Some adolescents are of course not interested in reading fiction in their own or any other language, but for those who <u>are</u>, the benefits of a program to help them may be unlimited. While there is a

rich body of literature in Spanish, many educated people of all ages enjoy the challenge and satisfaction of being able to read popular English literature or the classics in the original,if they feel that linguistic or cultural difficulties will not detract too much from their enjoyment. Yet without support and guidance, daunted by the amount of unfamiliar vocabulary or the sheer length of the text, too many non-native speakers give up at their first attempt to read a complete work in English alone and never try again. Others dutifully read, discuss,and even take pleasure in the simplified or simple readers which are required at school, but they never manage to make the transition to the appreciation of works intended for native speakers of English which might be better suited to their own individual tastes.

Some of the benefits of making this transition from dependence on teacher and task to independent reading have already been mentioned, but there are others. Firstly, extensive reading of English fiction is probably the most widely available and useful form of self-study exercise. Secondly, discourse written by native speakers for native speakers is genuinely communicative and provides an infinitely wide range of contexts within which words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs combine to convey information, ideas, attitudes and emotions. Furthermore, it is a reasonable hypothesis that the more language a learner is exposed to, the more likely it is that a certain amount will become absorbed into his receptive competence and that his English will therefore improve effortlessly as he reads.

To the potential rewards of entertainment, greater linguistic competence and an increasingly confident approach to written discourse (which even <u>light</u> fiction can offer) one may add a fourth which is particularly relevant to younger readers and readers brought up in a very different environment from the author - that of heightened cultural awareness. The reading of fiction encourages the development of the imagination while bringing temporary relief or escape from reality; but paradoxically, since a writer must inevitably draw on his own experience and that of his assumed readership, it also provides insight into the lives of real people. By highlighting

extraordinary events and emotions, a work of fiction simultaneously throws light on the ordinary, the everyday and the routine in the culture from which it springs.

It also follows that without treating a novel exclusively as a source of factual, cultural data (which it is not intended to be), young readers may become aware that when they eventually use English for a communicative purpose outside the classroom, they will find themselves in a system of interaction which on the whole exists only fictitiously for them at school. Frames of reference will have to be negotiated with potential interlocutors by mutual shifts in perspective in order for communication to be successful, and the ability to place oneself in an imaginary world and identify with the actions and attitudes of fictional characters is a valuable preparatory exercise.

What then can be done to help learners develop the confidence to choose an appropriate book and then read it independently? At lower levels (elementary and lower intermediate) students should be encouraged to read large numbers of good, interesting readers which can provide what Widdowson (1978) calls "gradual approximation" - increasing structural complexity, an ever-greater variety of stylistic features, more and more cultural presuppositions - until students are psychologically prepared to move on to books written for native speakers. There are, after all, only about 1,200 simple/simplified readers in print at any one time, and after three years or so of English, a student who enjoys reading will have read all those which are locally available and which interest him.

At the same time, the systematic training in extensive reading strategies, so often neglected at lower levels, is vital. Too many students assume that the skills appropriate to the close study of short pedagogical texts should be transferred to their reading of longer works, and for this reason they read painfully slowly, word by word, looking up every unfamiliar lexical item in the dictionary, giving equal importance to each sentence, and assuming that meaning is there on the printed page to be 'extracted'. The unconscious

strategies of prediction, deduction, confirmation or revision of expectations, skimming, use of linguistic markers and so on, which enable a reader to read quickly and economically in his own language, may not be transferred to a foreign language text unless he is first made aware of them.

Building on the preparation outlined above, what is needed at mid/late intermediate level is a course designed specifically to help those students who wish to do so to read fiction independently. It is important to begin by introducing learners to the conventions of light fiction, as re-creation of the author's meaning. Integration of this with personal experience in order to interpret and evaluate the story are much simpler than for a work of greater and more permanent literary merit. It is unrealistic to expect students to move directly from simple readers to Hamlet or David Copperfield, since the use of language for distinctive stylistic purposes is unexpected and difficult to interpret, and a great deal of socio-cultural (including historical) background information is necessary before these works can be enjoyed.

Let us assume, therefore, that the intermediate teacher has available to him ten contact hours (the absolute minimum, if any progress is to be made) in which to activate and help students apply the most important strategies for independent, extensive reading. How should he proceed? First of all, although the aim is to enable students to read according to their own tastes, he will need a set text which he can use for the duration of the course. The lexical field particular to a given theme can then be held constant while learners are made aware of generalizable reading strategies. Class activities based on the beginning of each story or chapter should be seen as preparatory to individual reading of the text as a whole, with the possibility of quicker and more economical feedback than if each student were reading a different text.

The work should be chosen after consultation with the students so that the genre appeals to as many learners as possible. As Kellerman (1981) points out, "Mysterious, adventurous and legendary tales have an undeniable and universal appeal...; they belong

to all ages, times and cultures."

The book should also look representative of any light fiction written for native speakers, without glossaries or comprehension questions in the back. The price must be within the means of the purchaser (the student or institution) and available in large enough numbers for each learner to have a personal copy to take home and read in his own time. The length should not be prohibitive: for a course of ten weekly lessons, ten short stories or chapters are enough, none so long that it cannot be read in the time between each class. In fact, short stories are probably preferable since, as Povey (1979) says, "Working through a novel chapter by chapter may build up suspense...but it does not allow one to talk across its total sequence until too late in the term."

Finally, there has been much discussion about the criterion of "readability," but if text length and conceptual difficulty are not too demanding, if the story is appealing and if students are taught to avoid word-by-word reading, they can cope with a level of English far above what they are actually able to produce.

Many theories about the skills (perhaps 200, according to Gatherer [1981]) involved in the silent reading process remain intuitively satisfying hypotheses. It has been shown, however, that a fluent reader does not read every letter or even every word of a text, in spite of the fact that a child cannot begin to read unless he can recognize the shapes of words when they appear in print. Instead, an efficient reader will revise his prior expectations as to the message of what is to him an undemanding text by reading in sense units of several words at a time, fixing his eyes on each key word, but to a certain and sufficient extent taking in surrounding items at the same time. Then he will absorb the meaning into his general and specific experience of the genre and the topic. The selection of key words is achieved by continuous anticipation of what will follow, based on the following factors: preconceived ideas about the type and content of the text, semantic and syntactic clues,

and redundancy. The reader's eyes move back along the line of print only if recovery from an erroneous prediction is not possible. For detailed discussion of the above see Smith (1971).

The efficient reader reads frequently and never passively. His experience interacts with the author's on literal, inferential, evaluative and 'action' levels; he adjusts his reading style and speed to suit the text; he uses experience, memory, context and his knowledge of grammar to deduce the meaning of unfamiliar expressions; and he makes full use of available reading aids, from the library to his dictionary or a table of contents (Moyle 1980). All these skills can be trained, and, since light fiction is intellectually undemanding for readers with a secondary education, the emphasis during the reading program can be on bringing them to consciousness and practising their use on foreign language texts.

It is suggested, therefore, that the ten course units focus on the following:

1. Developing awareness of approaches to the text

It is important to start by making the rationale behind the course explicit, by encouraging students to think about how they read in their mother tongue. Erroneous assumptions (eg., "To understand the text as a whole, it is necessary to understand the meaning of each lexical item in it") may then be exposed immediately and replaced by a more scientific and comprehensive view of the reading process.

Suggested activities to stimulate discussion. A questionnaire involving introspection into L_1 reading habits; short extracts from psycholinguistic literature.

2. The creation of expectations about a work of fiction

Preliminary expectations about the genre, plot and characters of a story, can be evoked by surveying what Bond and Tinker (1973) call the "expectancy clues": the title, blurb, pictures, introduction,

table of contents, etc. Discussion of the implications of these expectancy clues will generate low frequency vocabulary and help students develop an awareness of stereotypical events, characters and forms of behavior which may be adhered to or manipulated by the author. Anticipation of a specific story will, in addition, increase the motivation to read and to confirm or revise expectations as the tale unfolds.

Suggested activities: Pre-surveying questions which focus on these clues and thus draw attention to the most efficient procedure for previewing any book. For example, "Find the contents page. What information does this page give you?"

3. Predicting from clues to the organization of the text

Familiarity with the conventions of written English discourse comes with experience of discourse in general, and of specific genres in particular, but the foreign learner can at least be taught to look for the intersentential connectors which indicate the functional relationship between one sentence or paragraph and the next. However, the inexperienced L_2 reader's task is made more difficult if the writer assumes that his readers can infer the course of development from semantic clues alone. Thus, practice in predicting the content of a paragraph on the basis of the propositions expressed in the first sentence or preceding paragraph is also necessary.

Suggested activities: The re-creation of a text from jumbled sentences or paragraphs, followed by a discussion of the clues used to do so; the matching of paragraphs with true or false summaries of them, building up a summary of an extended stretch of discourse; ordering events chronologically; prediction exercises based on one sentence or paragraph, recording predictions before reading on to confirm or revise them.

4. Dealing with unfamiliar lexical items

Vocabulary teaching is not an appropriate or economical activity for an extensive reading class, since what students need are opportunities and training to develop the word-attack strategies used

by native speakers. Comprehension does not depend on recognizing every word. Wallace (1982) points out that almost 10% of the lexical items in the first few paragraphs of Burgess' A Clockwork Orange are not part of the English language, and yet we persevere and usually succeed in making sense of the passage. Unfamiliar items that do not impede communication may be passed over while using contextual clues to deduce the meaning of those which seem important. Practice is therefore necessary in the identification of key words; in the sparing but efficient use of an adequate dictionary; and in inferring meaning from context and derivation. (What is the syntactic function of the item? What can we learn from its morphological composition? Are there any other words in the immediate context which might indicate the general semantic field?)
Suggested activities: Cloze exercises to show how much may be understood with up to 20% of the text missing; gist questions on a text with a high density of unfamiliar vocabulary: (Which questions can be answered immediately? Which items must be understood to answer the rest? Are there any clues to their meaning? Are they vital enough to justify interrupting one's reading to consult a dictionary?); identifying synonyms, word families and collocations in a text; recognition of the syntactic and semantic implications of prefixes and suffixes; extracting the most important information from a paragraph.

5. Increasing reading speed

A slow reader will necessarily be adding the meaning of each word to that of the previous one, which is far less effective than reading in meaningful units as a native speaker does. Smith (1971) claims that fluent reading involving immediate meaning identification (absorbing meaning from a glance at the text) cannot take place at less than 200 words per minute, and ideally at 500. This may be unattainable for intermediate students reading unsimplified texts, but any increase in reading speed will discourage students from reading every word, subvocalizing and/or mentally translating what they see on the page. It will therefore help them to read more efficiently. The ability to read fast, yet with understanding, depends on the reader's skill in predicting and inferring, which in turn depends on

the linguistic and extra-linguistic knowledge and experience he brings to the text.
Suggested activities: Comparing (followed by discussion of the implications) reading speeds on first and second language texts which are similar in tone, subject matter, cultural assumptions, linguistic difficulty and length; previewing and skimming activities to build up expectations before reading normally to confirm or reject them; running a finger under the line of print to encourage the eyes to move forward at an ever-faster pace and to discourage regressions; using texts with key words in capitals so that students may easily focus on them and then check their understanding by answering comprehension questions.

6. Recognizing cohesive links

Intermediate students may well have been exposed only to reading materials which, for the sake of explicitness, minimize cohesive complexity. It is therefore worth devoting one course unit to basic discourse analysis, examining the function of the lexical and grammatical devices listed in Halliday and Hasan (1976) which contribute to "texture," since ignorance of the significance of these intersentential and intrasentential ties may prevent comprehension.
Suggested activities: Gap-filling, comprehension and interpretation exercises which draw attention to the author's use of cataphoric, anaphoric and (especially) extended reference; exercises on the way general nouns and superordinate and specific terms may be used to denote the same referent for reasons of style or elaboration; work with items like 'one ','so' and 'do',which may replace nominal, clausal and verbal elements; interpretation of ellipsis; study of those conjunctions most frequently used in the relatively informal style of popular narrative.

7. Language in context

This component of the course is seen as an opportunity for integrating guidelines about the function of cohesive ties into a more

comprehensive consideration of the use of language in the creation of written discourse; that is, the function of a text or part of a text, the illocutionary acts carried out by means of particular structural patterns, and the connotative and metaphorical meanings of lexical items in context. Given the nature of the material to be read, the stylistic analysis will be of a very basic level, but principles of textual organization, thematization and lexical choice need some clarification since authors may adopt (or even flout) conventions which the students themselves have been taught to adhere to. Suggested activities: 'Translating' constructions peculiar to written or formal discourse into more informal, spoken English; reordering the first sentences of each of the half dozen opening paragraphs; differentiating between the introductory paragraphs and the beginning of the story itself, between descriptive and narrative passages, and among the uses of language for contrast, explanation, example, detail, etc.; interpreting metaphors; underlining words or phrases describing a particular character and then summarizing orally his/her personality and physical appearance; highlighting the conventions of direct speech in written English by, for example, analyzing the meanings of verbs of 'saying'.

8. Understanding a story and responding to it

The responsive reader of a work of fiction mentally recreates scenes and events, shares the writer's involvement with his characters, understands his attitude towards them, and appreciates the motivations and moral dilemmas of the characters themselves (Bright and McGregor 1970). The author assumes that his readers will respond appropriately becasue they are familiar with his cultural background and his values, but as long as the foreign reader has enough background knowledge to follow the gist of the story and is aware of his limitations as regards interpretation, he can often revise his preconceptions about the writer's perspective on reflection and in retrospect, as a native speaker does when reading a work of fiction written centuries before. At this level, evaluation need consist of little more than appreciation, or lack of appreciation, of the story with a brief justification of a particular response.
Suggested activities: True/false questions focusing on motives and

relationships, followed by discussion; the matching of characters with a list of adjectives that might describe them; justifying one's choice of the most and least admirable characters in a story; questionnaires to discover which of the stories or chapters read so far students enjoyed most, and why; writing reviews; the completion of story-report forms, giving a brief synopsis and a short evaluation of the story.

9-10. Selecting an appropriate book to read

Probably the most important skill for the newly independent, intermediate reader to acquire is choosing a suitable book from those available. Most adolescents with a secondary school education will be accustomed to choosing works of fiction and reference books for school subjects or hobbies in their mother tongue, but at this stage of learning a foreign language there must be some compromise between interest value and linguistic difficulty in second language texts; so it is necessary to encourage awareness of the features to look for when browsing in a bookshop or library.
Suggested activities: Completion of previewing forms for books brought into the classroom, noting the following: the clues to content from the covers, blurb and first page of each book; the length of the whole work, each chapter/story and an average paragraph; the print size; the proportion of dialogue; and the linguistic difficulty of the first and other randomly chosen pages. In the last session, a guided visit to the nearest (school, public, British Council) library, preceded by the completion of a questionnaire to help students decide on the kind of book they are going to look for. When they find one which seems suitable, they may either use the discipline of the previewing form as a check or discuss their choice individually with the teacher.

A course based on this outline is intended to prepare students as far as possible in whatever time is available for extensive reading of light fiction and, for the duration of the course and intermittently after that, to check that students are understanding and responding to what they read. There is a lot that researchers do not yet know about

the activity of silent reading simply because so much takes place in the brain, but recent insights from the disciplines of psycholinguistics and discourse analysis have given syllabus designers some confidence that training students in certain strategies will make them more aware and therefore more efficient readers. With practice they may become as fluent readers in their foreign language as in their mother tongue.

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